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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SOCIALISM.—IV.

BY W. H. MALLOCK.

THE belief that socialism represents a practicable form of society, as I showed in the preceding article, has been, and still is, defended by its exponents on two different and contradictory grounds. One of these is a doctrine relating to the labor of ordinary men; the other is a doctrine relating to a proposed alteration in the motives which will enable society to secure for itself the services of men who are exceptional.

Socialism in its original form—the socialism of the school of Marx—which is still the socialism preached by socialistic propagandists to the masses, says: “The many do everything in production; the few do absolutely nothing. We need not, therefore, trouble ourselves with considering the position of the latter. We have nothing to do but to dispossess them, and their whole inheritance shall be ours.” The intellectual socialism of to-day, though it promises the same results, rejects this original version of the socialistic gospel with disdain, and is now repreaching it in an amended and a totally different form. “We by no means affirm,” it says, “that the exceptional few do nothing, and that ordinary labor, independently of other forces, produces all or even most of the wealth of the modern world. On the contrary, we recognize that the directive ability of the few, which the earlier socialists ignored, produces the larger part of it; and we must get them to exert this ability precisely as they do now. But they shall exert it for us on our own terms; for we will effect such a change in their characters that whatever they produce they will allow us to take away from them, and the whole of their inheritance shall be ours precisely as Karl Marx promised.”

Now, what I propose to point out in the present article is that both these theories of socialism, contradictory as they are in their

details, rest alike on a fallacy, which is in both cases fundamentally the same. This fallacy consists in an ascription to democratic societies, or rather to democratic majorities, if sufficiently large and unanimous, of powers which are beyond the reach of any kind of government whatsoever. Such an ascription of imaginary powers to the so-called "sovereign" people is, however, by no means peculiar to socialists, who are guilty of nothing but pushing it to its full logical consequences; and I will begin with illustrating it by the arguments of a writer who is not a socialist, but who has recently approached, from a more or less conservative standpoint, this precise question of motive with which we have just been concerned ourselves.

A special propriety attaches to my reference to this writer here, for the arguments to which I am about to refer were published last summer in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*,* and the author, who hides his personality under the signature "X," may be said to be one of the best-known and most highly respected of the living philosophers of America. The subject with which he deals in the article from which I am about to quote is the growth in America, not of large, but of colossal, fortunes, which have certainly had no parallel in the past history of the world. The position of "X" is that the growth of such fortunes is deplorable, partly because they are possible instruments of judicial and political corruption, and partly because they excite antagonism against private wealth in general by exhibiting it to the gaze of the multitude in such monstrous and grotesque proportions. In any case, says "X," "it is to the true interest of the multimillionaires themselves to join those who are free from envy in trying to remove the rapidly growing dissatisfaction with their continued possession of these vast sums of money."

Now, though "X" hints that some of the fortunes in question may be open to farther reprehension, on the ground that they have been acquired dishonestly, he by no means maintains that this opprobrium attaches itself to the great majority of them. On the contrary, he admits that the typical huge fortunes of America are based on the productive activities of the remarkable men who have amassed them. The talents of such men, he says, are essential to the prosperity of the country, and it is necessary to stimu-

* I criticised them myself in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, in an article published shortly afterwards.

late such men to develop their talents to the utmost by allowing them to derive for themselves some special reward for their use of these talents; but he contends that the rewards which they are at present permitted to appropriate are needlessly and dangerously excessive, and ought therefore to be limited. But limited by what means? It is his answer to this question that here alone concerns us.

The means, he says, by which these rewards may be limited are ready to hand, and can be applied with the utmost ease. They are provided by the democratic Constitution of the United States of America. "No one can doubt, for example," he goes on to observe, "that, if the majority of the voters of the State of New York chose to elect a Governor of their own way of thinking, they could readily enact a progressive taxation of incomes which would limit every citizen of New York State to such income as the majority of voters considers sufficient for him. And it would be particularly easy," adds the writer, "to alienate the property of every man at death, for it is only necessary to repeal the statutes now authorizing the descent of such property to the heirs and legatees of the decedent." Here, then, according to "X," is an obvious way out of the difficulty, the feasibility of which no one can doubt. A certain minority of the citizens render services essential to the majority; but these advantages are accompanied by a corresponding drawback. The majority, by the simple use of their sovereign power as legislators, can retain the former, and get rid of the latter. The remedy is in their own hands.

It would be difficult to imagine an illustration more vivid than this of the error to which I am now referring—the common error of ascribing to majorities in democratic communities powers which they do not possess, and which, as I said before, no kind of government possesses, whether it be that of a democracy or of an autocrat. That a majority of the voters in any democratic country can enact any laws they please at any given moment which happen to be in accordance with what "X" calls their then "way of thinking," and perhaps enforce them for a moment, is no doubt perfectly true. But life is not made up of isolated moments or periods. It is a continuous process, in which each moment is affected by the moments that have gone before, and by the prospective character of the moments that are to come after. If it were not for this fact, the majority of the voters of New

York State, “by electing a Governor of their own way of thinking,” might not only put a limit to the income which any citizen might possess. It might do a great deal more besides. It might enact a law which limited the amount which any citizen might eat. It might limit everybody to two ounces a day. Besides enacting that no father should bequeath his wealth to his children, it might enact just as readily that no father should have the custody of his children. It might enact, in obedience to the persuasions of some plausible quack, that no one should take any medicines but a single all-curing pill. There is nothing in the principles so solemnly laid down by “X” which would render any of these enactments more impossible than those which he himself contemplates. But, if such enactments were made by the so-called all-powerful majority, through a Governor of their own way of thinking, what would be the result? If a law forbade the citizens to eat enough to keep themselves alive, it might perhaps be obeyed throughout Monday, but it would be broken by Tuesday morning. A law which deprived fathers of the care of their own children might just as well be a law which decreed that no children should be born. A law which decreed that no remedy but the same quack pill should be applied to any disease, whether cholera, appendicitis or smallpox, would be either disregarded from the beginning, or would soon be repealed by a pestilence. In short, if any one of these ridiculous laws were enacted, the very voters who voted for it would disregard it as soon as they realized its consequences, and the work which they did as legislators they would tear to pieces as men. In other words, if we mean, by legislation, legislation which can be permanently obeyed, the legislative sovereignty of democracies, which is so commonly spoken of as supreme, is limited in every direction by another power greater than itself; and this is the double power of nature and of human nature. Just as all laws relating to the food which men are to eat, and the drugs by which their maladies are to be cured, must depend on the natural qualities of such and such physical substances, so do the constitution and propensities of the concrete human character limit legislation generally, and confine it within certain channels.

This is what “X” and similar thinkers forget; and the nature of their error is very pertinently illustrated by an observation of the English jurist, Lord Coleridge, to which “X” solemnly re-

fers, as corroborating him in his own wisdom. "The same power," says Lord Coleridge, "which prescribes rules for the possession of property can of course alter them"; this power being the legislative body of whatever country may be in question. It is easy to see the manner in which Lord Coleridge reasons. Because, in any country, the formulation and enforcement of laws have the will of the governing body as the proximate cause which determines them, it seems to Lord Coleridge that, in this contemporary will, the laws thus formulated and enforced have their ultimate cause also. For example, according to him, the entire institution of property in the State of New York is virtually a fresh creation of the voters from year to year, and has nothing else behind it. But, in reality, all this business of formulation and enforcement is a secondary process, not a primary process at all. Lord Coleridge is simply inverting the actual order of things. Half the existing "rules prescribed as to the possession of property" have, for their ultimate object, the protection of family life, the privacy of the private home, and the provision made by parents for their children. But family life is not primarily the creation of prescribed rules. It is the creation of instincts and affections which have developed themselves in the course of ages. Instead of the law creating family life, it is family life which has gradually called into being—which has created and dictated—the rules and sanctions protecting it. The same is the case with bequest, marriage, and so forth. The conduct of civilized men is bound to conform to laws, but the laws must first conform to general human practice. They merely give precision to conduct which has a deeper origin than legislation. Laws, in fact, may be compared to soldiers' uniforms. These, within certain limits, may be varied indefinitely by a war-office; but they all must be such as will adapt themselves to the human body and its movements. The will of a government may prescribe that the trousers shall be tight or loose, that they shall be black or brown or bright green or vermillion. But no government can prescribe that they shall be only three inches round the waist, or that the soldiers' sleeves shall start, not from the shoulders, but from the pockets of the coat tails. The human body is here a legislator which is supreme over all governments; and just the same thing is true with regard to the human character.

Now, the curious thing with regard to "X" is that he is all

along assuming this fundamental fact himself; though he utterly fails to put two and two together, and see how this fact conflicts with the omnipotence which he ascribes to legislation. Let us go back to the assertion, which embodies his whole practical argument, that the majority of the voters in New York State could, without interfering with the activity of any one of its citizens, limit incomes in any manner they pleased, and alienate with even greater ease the property of every man at his death; and let us see what he hastens to say as the sequel to this oracular utterance.

These powers of the sovereign majority, which he is apparently so anxious to invoke, would, he says, be practically much less formidable in their action than timid persons might anticipate. And why would they be less formidable? "Because," says "X," "although each man, by reason of his manhood alone, has an equal voice with every other man in making the laws governing their common country, and regulating the distribution of the common property . . . yet immense and incalculable differences exist in men's natural capacities for rendering honest service to society. Encouragement should, therefore, be given to every man to use all the gifts which he possesses to the fullest extent possible; and, accordingly, reasonable accumulations and the descent of these should be respected." They should, he says, be respected. Yes—but for what reason? Because they encourage exceptional men, whose services are essential to society, to develop and use their capacities to "the fullest extent possible"; and this is merely another way of saying that, without the motive provided by the possibility of accumulation and bequest, the exceptional faculties would not be developed or used at all. Moreover, the amounts which may be accumulated and bequeathed, although they will be strictly limited, must, "X" says, be considerable. He suggests that incomes should be allowed up to forty thousand dollars, and bequeathable property up to a million dollars. And here we come to a question which is still more pertinent than the preceding. Why must the permissible amounts of income and of bequeathable property be of proportions such as those which he contemplates? Why does he not take his bill and write down quickly a thousand dollars of income instead of forty thousand, and limit bequeathable property to ten thousand instead of a million? Because he evidently recognizes that the men whose possible services to society are "im-

mensely and incalculably greater" than those of the majority of their fellow citizens would not be tempted by a reward which, reduced to its smallest proportions, would not be very largely in excess of what was attainable by more ordinary exertions. In his formal statement of his case, he says that the amount of the reward would be entirely determined by what *ought* to be sufficient for the purpose in the estimation of the voting majority; and he mentions the sums in question as those on which they would probably fix. And it is, of course, quite imaginable that the majority, in making either these or any other estimates, might be right. But what "X" fails altogether to see is that, if the majority of the citizens *were* right, such sums would not be sufficient because the majority of citizens happened to think that they ought to be. They would be sufficient because they were felt to be sufficient by the minority who were invited to earn them, at whose feelings the majority would have made a shrewd or a lucky guess. A thousand men with fishing-rods might meet in an inn parlor and vote that such and such flies were sufficient to attract trout. But it lies with the trout to determine whether or no he will rise to them. It is a question, not of what the fishermen think, but of what the trout thinks; and the fishermen's thoughts are effective only when they coincide with the trout's.

So long, then, as society desires to get the best work out of its citizens, and so long as some men are, in the words of "X," "immensely and incalculably" more efficient than the great mass of their fellows, and so long as their efficiency requires, as "X" admits that it does, some exceptional reward to induce these men to develop it, these men themselves, in virtue of their inherent characters, must primarily determine what the reward shall be; and not all the majorities in the world, however unanimous, could make a reward sufficient if the particular minority in question did not feel it to be so. The majority might, by making a sufficient reward unattainable, easily prevent the services from being rendered at all; but, unless they are to forego the services, the majority can only obtain them on terms which will depend on the men who are to render them.

Now, in what I have been urging thus far—which practically comes to this, that the sovereignty popularly ascribed to democratic majorities is an illusion—not socialists only, but other advocates of popular government also, will alike be against me,

as the promulgator of some blasphemous paradox. It will be easy, however, to show them that their objections are quite mistaken, and that the exceptional powers of dictation which have just been ascribed to a minority are so far from being inconsistent with the real powers of the majority that the latter, when properly understood, are seen to be their complement and their counterpart. For, though socialists and thinkers like "X" ascribe to majorities powers which they do *not* possess, we shall find that majorities do actually possess others, in some ways very much greater, of which such thinkers have thus far taken no cognizance at all. I have said that minorities can dictate their own terms to majorities which desire to secure their services, the reason being that the former are alone competent to determine what treatment will supply them with a motive to exert themselves. What holds good of minorities as opposed to majorities holds good in essentials, though in a somewhat different form, of majorities as opposed to such minorities.

Let us turn again to a matter to which I have referred already—namely, the family life of the citizens of any race or nation. This results from propensities in a vast number of human beings which, although they are similar, are in each case independent. These propensities give rise to legislation, the object of which is to prescribe rules by which their satisfaction may be made secure; but the propensities are so far from originating in legislation that no legislation which seriously interfered with them would be tolerated. Socialists themselves have continually admitted this very thing. The Italian socialist, Giovanni Rossi, for instance, who attempted about fifteen years ago to found a socialistic colony in Brazil—an attempt which completely failed—attributed its failure largely to this particular cause, namely, the impossibility of inducing the colonists to conform to any rules of the community by which family life was interfered with. Here we have an example of democracy in its genuine form, rendering powerless what affected to be democratic legislation. We have the cumulative power of similar human characters compelling legislation to limit itself to what these characters spontaneously demand. And now let us go a step—a very short step—farther. The family propensities in question show their dictatorial power, not only in the limitations which they impose on positive laws, but also in the character which they impose on the material surround-

ings of existence, especially in the material structure of the dwellings of all classes except the lowest. All are constructed with a view to keeping the family group united, and each family group separate from all others. Further, if the natural family propensities thus affect the structure of the dwelling, other propensities, more various in detail, but in each case equally spontaneous, determine what commodities shall be put in it.

And this fact brings us back to our own more immediate subject—namely, the power of the few and of the many in the sphere of economic production. The man of exceptional industrial capacity becomes rich in the modern world by producing goods, or by rendering services, which others consume or profit by, and for which they render him a return. But, in order that they may take, and render him this return for, what he offers them, the goods and the services must be such that the many desire to have them. All the highest productive ability that has ever been devoted to the business of cheapening and multiplying commodities, or rendering social services, would be absolutely futile unless these commodities and services satisfied tastes or wants existing in various sections of the community. The eliciting of such wants or tastes depends very often, and in progressive communities usually, on a previous supply of the commodities or services that minister to them—as we see, for example, in the case of tobacco, of the telegraph, and of the bicycle; but, when once the demands have been elicited, they are essentially democratic in their nature. Each customer is like a voter who practically gives his vote for the kinds of goods which he desires to have supplied to him. He gives his vote under no compulsion. He is under the manipulation of no party or wire-puller; and the men by whose ability the goods are cheapened and multiplied are bound to determine their character by the number of votes cast for them.

Thus, whilst—so long as the productivity of labor is intensified, as it is in the modern world, by the ability of the few who direct labor—the laboring majority can never be free in their technical capacity of producers; they are free, and must always remain free in respect of their tastes as consumers. In other words, demand is essentially democratic, whilst supply, in proportion to its sustained and enhanced abundance, is essentially oligarchic.

Now, that demand is essentially democratic, and depends on the tastes and characters of those by whom the demands are made, no-

body will be inclined to deny. But if we turn our attention from society, taken as a whole, to the exceptionally able minority on whom the business of supply depends, we shall find that these men, in their turn, form similarly a small democracy in themselves, and make, as suppliers, their own demands also—a demand for an economic reward, or an amount of personal wealth, not indeed necessarily equal to the amount of wealth produced by them, but bearing a proportion to it which is, in their own estimation, sufficient. This demand made by the exceptional producer rests on exactly the same basis as does that of the average customer. It rests on the tastes and characters of the men who make it; and it is just as impossible for the many to decide by legislation that the few shall put forth the whole of their exceptional powers for the sake of one reward, when what they want is another, as it is for the few to make the many buy snuff when they want tobacco, or buy green coats when they want black.

That such is the case will, to those who may be inclined to doubt it, become more evident if they consider with more attention than they are generally accustomed to exercise what the main attraction of great wealth is for the men who in the modern world are the producers of it on the greatest scale. Socialists and similar reformers—the people who principally busy themselves with discussing what this attraction is—are the people who are least capable of forming any true opinion about it. They not only have, as a rule, no experience of wealth themselves, but they are farther generically distinguished by a deficiency of those powers that create it. They are like men with no muscles, who reason about the temperament of a prize-fighter; and their conception of what wealth means for those who produce and possess it is apt, in consequence, to be of the most puerile kind. It is founded, apparently, on their conception of what a greedy boy, without pocket-money, feels when he stares at the tarts lying in a pastry-cook's window. To them it seems that the desire for great wealth means simply the desire for purely sensual self-indulgence—especially for the eating and drinking of expensive food and wine. Consequently, whenever they wish to caricature a capitalist they invariably represent him as a man with a huge protuberant stomach. The folly of this conception is sufficiently shown by the fact that many of the greatest of fortune-makers have, in their personal habits, been abstemious and even niggardly

to a degree which has made them proverbial; and that, even in the case of those who value personal luxury, the maximum of self-indulgence which any single human organism can appreciate, is obtainable by a hundredth part of the fortunes for the production of which such men work. The real secret of the attraction which wealth has for those who create it lies in the fact that wealth is simply a form of power. These men are made conscious by experience, as less gifted men are not, that they can, by the exercise of their own mental energies, add indefinitely to the wealth-producing forces of the community. They feel the machine respond to their own exceptional management of it; they see the output of wealth varied and multiplied at their will; and thus the results of their specialized power as producers are neither more nor less than this same internal power converted into an external, an indeterminate and universalized form; and the reason why they will never produce wealth merely in order to be deprived of it is that no one will exercise power merely in order to lose it, and allow it to pass into the hands of other people. These men, as experience, especially in America, shows us, are constantly willing to use this power for the benefit of their kind generally; but this is no more a sign that they would be willing to allow it to be forcibly taken from them than the fact that a man is willing to give a dollar to a beggar in the street is a sign that he would allow the beggar to steal it out of his waistcoat pocket.

So long as differences in personal power exist, especially in such power as affects the material circumstances of mankind, these differences in power, let governments take what form they please, will necessarily assert and embody themselves in the very structure of human society; and socialists are only able to obscure this fact from anybody either by a childish theory of modern production which they themselves are now repudiating, or else by a psychology even more laboriously childish, which would at once be exposed were it tested by so much as six months' experience. An interesting admission of the truth of this may be found in an unlikely place—namely, a work written some years ago by a socialist of considerable talent, which shows how the errors of at least a number of socialists are due, not to any defect in their reasoning powers, as such, but to a want of balanced knowledge of human nature in general, a want which in certain respects

renders their reasoning futile. The work to which I refer is a work by a socialistic novelist, who was also an accomplished naturalist—the late Mr. Grant Allen. It is called “The Woman Who Did.” The immediate object of the writer was to exhibit the institution of marriage as the cause of what he was pleased to regard as woman’s degradation and slavery; and his heroine is a young lady of highly respectable parentage, who proposes to regenerate womanhood by living with, and having children by, a man, without submitting to the humiliation of any legal bond. She accomplishes her purpose, and has a daughter, whose position, under our false civilization, becomes so disagreeable in consequence of her illegitimate birth, that the mother at last commits suicide, in order to deliver the daughter from the presence of a parent so embarrassing. In the author’s view she is a martyr, and a model for immediate imitation. Ludicrous, however, as the book is in its main scheme and in its object, the author shows great acuteness in a number of his incidental observations. He is, for example, constantly insisting on the fact that the institution of private property, which socialism aims at revolutionizing, is merely one embodiment of a general principle of individualism of which marriage and the family are another, and that the two stand and fall together. But an admission yet more important than this is as follows. So that nothing may be wanting to the bitterness of the heroine’s sublime martyrdom, the author represents her daughter—and he does this with considerable skill—as developing from her earliest childhood all those tastes and prejudices (an instinctive sympathy with those ordinary motives and standards) against which the mother’s whole life, and her education of her daughter, had been at war. “Herminia,” says Mr. Allen, “had done her best” to indoctrinate the child with the pure milk of the emancipating social gospel; “but the child herself seemed to hark back, of internal congruity, to the lower and vulgarer moral plane of her remoter ancestry. There is,” he proceeds, “no more silly and persistent error than the belief of parents that they can influence to any appreciable degree the moral ideas and impulses of their children. These things have their springs in the bases of character; they are the flower of individuality; and they cannot be altered after birth by the foolishness of preaching.” Let us read this passage, with the alteration of only a word or two, and it forms an admirable criticism

of the more recent speculations of the party to which Mr. Allen belonged. There is no more silly and persistent error on the part of socialists than the belief that they can influence to any appreciable degree the moral ideas and impulses of the citizens of any community, or that these things, which are the flower of congenital individuality, can be altered after birth by the foolishness of socialism.

I may appropriately end this survey—in its present form necessarily very imperfect—of socialism, as a scheme for the practical reconstitution of society, with the above criticism, made by one of the socialists themselves, of socialistic speculation in its most recent development. If only socialists would apply to their formal programme and principles the acuteness displayed by some of them when its exigencies are momentarily forgotten by them, they, or at all events some of them, would be accounted their own most destructive critics.

My own criticisms, in a very much more complete form, and supplemented by an examination of the more important replies made by socialists to the lectures which I delivered during the past winter in America, will be published, I hope, as a book, in the course of the coming autumn.

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